

TIMOR-LESTE 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship, and of religious instruction. Religious organizations may register with the government under the regulations provided for nonprofit corporate bodies. Muslim leadership reported discrimination against Muslims joining civil service positions. Despite 2017 legislation approving recognition of religious minority documents, religious minority groups continued to report incidents in which civil servants rejected marriage or birth certificates issued by religious organizations other than the Catholic Church. Non-Catholic groups reported tensions regarding unequal allocation of government funds.

One Protestant group filed a complaint with local courts after a local community denied land use to build a church.

The U.S. embassy engaged regularly with government officials, including the Office of the Prime Minister, on religious freedom issues including discrimination in public service, recognition of religious minority documentation, and budget allocation to different minority groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2015 census, 97.6 percent of the population is Catholic, 1.96 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim. Protestant denominations include the Assemblies of God, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christian Vision Church. There are also several small nondenominational Protestant congregations. Many citizens also retain animistic beliefs and practices along with their monotheistic religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship and specifies "religious denominations are separated from the State." It also prohibits

discrimination based on religious beliefs and guarantees both the right to conscientious objection and freedom to teach any religion. The constitution protects freedom of religion in the event of a declaration of a state of siege or state of emergency.

There is no official state religion; however, the constitution commends the Catholic Church for its participation in the country's liberation efforts. A concordat between the government and the Holy See establishes a legal framework for cooperation, grants the Catholic Church autonomy in establishing and running schools, provides tax benefits, safeguards the Church's historical and cultural heritage, and acknowledges the right of its foreign missionaries to serve in the country.

Religious organizations that simply conduct religious services do not need to register with the government and can obtain tax-exempt status from the Ministry of Finance. Religious organizations seeking to open private schools or provide other community services must submit articles of association and other relevant documentation to register as nonprofit corporate bodies through the Ministry of Justice's National Directorate for Registry and Notary Services (DNRN). The law requires a separate registration with the Ministry of Interior for associations with primarily foreign members, including religious organizations, which must submit their articles of incorporation, proof they have the means to carry out their activities, and the name of a designated representative. To receive a tax identification number, organizations must register first with the Ministry of Justice and then bring that registration to the Service for Registration and Verification of Businesses, the business registration agency. The DNRN then issues a certificate and legally charters the organization.

The Ministry of Education classifies religious study as an optional elective subject in public schools. Most schools in the country are public, although the Catholic Church also operates its own private schools.

The law states "foreigners cannot provide religious assistance to the defense and security forces, except in cases of absolute need and urgency." Foreign citizen missionaries and other religious figures are exempt from paying normal residence and visa fees. Visa regulations are the same for all foreign religious workers, regardless of religious affiliation.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Muslim leadership reported discrimination against Muslims joining civil service positions based on their names, including with the National Police and the Defense Force, as well as medical positions in local hospitals.

Despite 2017 legislation approving recognition of religious minority documents, Muslim and Protestant religious minority leaders again reported notaries public rejecting marriage and birth certificates from religious organizations other than the Catholic Church as supporting documentation for registering for schools and other official acts. The leaders stated this occurred on an ad hoc rather than systematic basis, and authorities resolved the incidents by addressing them with the notarial office director. In addition, reportedly many religious minorities remained unaware of the 2017 legislation. Registrations of births and marriages with the government continued to be available, but civil registration rates remained relatively low in comparison with registration for religious certificates. Religious minority leaders met with the prime minister on November 6 and discussed recognition of non-Catholic certificates and proposed further changes to the 2017 legislation approving recognition of religious minority documents, among other issues. Protestant and Muslim leaders said they would continue to engage the Offices of the President and Prime Minister to recognize non-Catholic certificates, as delineated in the 2017 law.

The Office of the Prime Minister provided a budget allocation to the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Timor-Leste and transferred \$1.5 million of funds to each of the country's three Catholic dioceses. The terms of the concordat with the Holy See governed the allocations. The direct budget allocations to the Catholic Church again caused some tension with non-Catholic religious groups, according to minority religious leaders. Catholics and all other religious groups could apply, along with other organizations, for part of a \$3.5 million government fund set aside for civil society organizations during the year. According to an official in the Prime Minister's Office, the fund supported the construction of a Protestant church and the construction of an orphanage in a mosque for the Muslim community. According to a Muslim leader, this orphanage was the only Islamic project the Office of the Prime Minister supported during the year.

Several Catholic holidays were also national holidays, and Catholic religious leaders regularly presided over government ceremonies.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Leaders of the Catholic Church and long-standing Protestant and Muslim communities again reported good cooperation and relationships among religious groups.

According to a Brazilian Protestant missionary, converts from animism and Catholicism to Protestantism faced pressure, prejudice, discrimination, and “persecution” from family, friends, and society. The head of a Catholic seminary in Dili described evangelicals as a “threat” to the Catholic Church but said poor persons would pray with and accept help from both Catholics and evangelicals.

A Protestant group filed a complaint with local courts after a local property owner refused to sell the group land upon hearing of their plans to build a Protestant church.

Many religious organizations, including the Catholic Church and some minority religious groups, received significant funding from foreign donors.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy engaged regularly with government officials, including the Office of the Prime Minister, on religious issues, such as discrimination in civil service hiring, recognition of religious minority documentation, and budget allocation to different minority groups.

The U.S. Ambassador met with a Catholic bishop and Muslim and Protestant community leaders and representatives to discuss the status of religious tolerance in local society.